

Foreign Policy of Japan Under Shinzo Abe: A Conceptual Framework

Introduction

Shinzo Abe occupies a unique position in contemporary Japanese political history. On 24 August 2020, he became the longest-serving Prime Minister of Japan since the establishment of the modern cabinet system (Liff & Lipsky, 2022, pp. 1-2). His leadership, spanning from 2006-2007 and again from 2012-2020, represented an unprecedented period of political stability and policy continuity under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). During an era marked by rapid geopolitical transformations, shifting power balances, and growing security uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific region, Abe emerged as a leader determined to redefine Japan's role in international affairs. Although his administration is often associated with ambitious economic reforms popularly known as "Abenomics," his most enduring legacy lies in the sphere of foreign and security policy (Hughes, 2021, pp. 3-5). Through a series of institutional reforms, diplomatic initiatives, and strategic partnerships, Abe sought to transform Japan from a passive participant in international politics into a proactive and influential actor capable of shaping regional and global developments.

The significance of Abe's foreign policy agenda can only be understood within the broader historical context of post-war Japan. Since the end of the Second World War, Japanese foreign policy had largely been guided by a security framework rooted in pacifism, economic reconstruction, and dependence on the United States for national defence (Pyle, 2018, pp. 15-18). The adoption of the Constitution of Japan in 1947, particularly Article 9, imposed significant restrictions on the country's military capabilities and renounced war as a sovereign right (The Constitution of Japan, 1947). Consequently, Japan pursued a foreign policy strategy that prioritised economic growth while relying on the United States-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of national security (Samuels, 2007, pp. 29-31). This arrangement enabled Japan to emerge as an economic powerhouse but simultaneously constrained its ability to play a more assertive role in regional and global security affairs.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the strategic environment surrounding Japan had undergone profound changes. The rapid rise of China as an economic and military power fundamentally altered the balance of power in East Asia (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 360-365). Beijing's growing maritime presence and increasing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas generated concerns among neighbouring states, including Japan (Smith, 2019, pp. 112-115). Simultaneously, North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and repeated ballistic missile tests posed direct security challenges to Japanese territory and regional stability (Hughes, 2021, pp. 87-90). These developments raised serious questions regarding the adequacy of Japan's traditional security framework and the continued relevance of the post-war constraints that had shaped its foreign policy for decades.

1 It was within this changing geopolitical context that Abe sought to
 2 reposition Japan as a more active and responsible stakeholder in international
 3 affairs. Unlike many of his predecessors who remained largely committed to the
 4 existing post-war framework, Abe advocated a strategic vision that emphasised
 5 national resilience, diplomatic activism, and enhanced security capabilities (Liff
 6 & Lipsky, 2022, pp. 145-148). His leadership represented what many observers
 7 described as a restoration of Japanese confidence, self-esteem, and strategic
 8 autonomy (Pyle, 2018, pp. 278-280). Abe believed that Japan's status as the
 9 world's third-largest economy should be matched by greater diplomatic
 10 influence and a stronger role in maintaining regional and global order.

11 According to Liff and Lipsky (2022, pp. 150-152), Abe consistently
 12 promoted a foreign policy agenda that was both bold and transformative. Shortly
 13 after returning to power in 2012, he famously declared that "Japan is back,"
 14 signalling his determination to restore the country's international influence and
 15 strategic relevance (Abe, 2013, para. 1). Under his leadership, Japan adopted a
 16 more proactive diplomatic posture, expanded its security partnerships, and
 17 played an increasingly prominent role in multilateral forums. Abe also
 18 championed the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which
 19 sought to promote freedom of navigation, respect for international law, maritime
 20 security, and regional connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan
 21 [MOFA], 2017, para. 3). This vision subsequently became one of the defining
 22 strategic frameworks of the contemporary Indo-Pacific region.

23 Abe's foreign policy was characterised not only by ambitious diplomatic
 24 initiatives but also by substantial institutional and legal reforms. His
 25 administration established Japan's National Security Council, introduced the
 26 country's first National Security Strategy, strengthened defence capabilities, and
 27 reinterpreted constitutional restrictions to allow for the exercise of collective
 28 self-defence under specific circumstances (Government of Japan, 2013, pp. 1-4).
 29 These measures reflected a significant departure from Japan's traditional
 30 security posture and demonstrated a willingness to adapt national policy to
 31 emerging geopolitical realities. Furthermore, Abe actively strengthened strategic
 32 partnerships with countries such as the United States, India, and Australia while
 33 supporting the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), thereby
 34 contributing to the formation of a broader regional security architecture (Smith,
 35 2019, pp. 201-205).

36 The transformation of Japan's foreign policy under Abe can be effectively
 37 analysed through the theoretical lens of neo-realism. Neo-realist scholars argue
 38 that state behaviour is shaped primarily by the structure of the international
 39 system and the distribution of power among states (Waltz, 1979, pp. 88-93). In
 40 an anarchic international environment, states seek to maximise security and
 41 respond to perceived threats through balancing strategies, alliance formation,
 42 and military preparedness. Japan's strategic adjustments during Abe's tenure can
 43 therefore be understood as a response to changing regional power dynamics and
 44 emerging security challenges (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 368-372).

45 Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to analyse the political and
 46 security implications of the fundamental shift in Japan's foreign policy during

Shinzo Abe's tenure within a neo-realist framework. The study explores the domestic and international factors that encouraged Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security policies, assesses the outcomes of his major foreign policy initiatives, and evaluates the extent to which his tenure represents a decisive turning point in the trajectory of post-war Japanese foreign policy. Specifically, the article addresses three key questions: (a) What factors compelled Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security policy framework? (b) What outcomes emerged from the new foreign policy initiatives undertaken during his tenure? and (c) To what extent does Abe's leadership constitute a major transformation in Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation? By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of Japan's evolving strategic identity and its growing role in shaping the contemporary Indo-Pacific order.

Shinzo Abe's Vision of a New Japan

The foreign policy transformation that occurred during Shinzo Abe's tenure cannot be fully understood without examining his broader vision for Japan's national future. Long before he became the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history, Abe articulated a comprehensive ideological and political agenda aimed at revitalising Japan's domestic institutions, strengthening national identity, and enhancing the country's international standing. His vision was shaped by conservative political thought, concerns about Japan's declining global influence, and a belief that the post-war order had imposed unnecessary constraints on the country's potential (Edstrom, 2007, pp. 7-8). Consequently, Abe sought not merely to introduce policy reforms but to redefine Japan's national purpose in the twenty-first century.

Abe's vision became particularly evident during his campaign for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2006. According to Edstrom (2007), Abe presented a broad roadmap for Japan's future development, identifying four major national goals that would guide his political agenda (pp. 8-9). These goals reflected a combination of cultural conservatism, economic modernisation, political reform, and international activism. Together, they formed the foundation of what can be described as Abe's project of national renewal.

The first goal was the creation of a country that values culture, tradition, history, and nature. Abe argued that post-war Japan had gradually lost confidence in its cultural heritage and historical identity. He maintained that a strong sense of national consciousness was essential for social cohesion and international respect. In his view, Japan's traditions, historical experiences, and cultural values should be regarded as sources of national strength rather than obstacles to modernisation (Edstrom, 2007, p. 8). This emphasis on cultural continuity reflected his broader commitment to restoring national pride and cultivating a stronger sense of collective identity among Japanese citizens.

1 The second goal focused on building a country based on freedom and
 2 discipline. Abe maintained that democratic freedoms must be accompanied by
 3 social responsibility and civic duty. While supporting market-oriented reforms
 4 and individual liberties, he also stressed the importance of discipline, public
 5 order, and national responsibility. According to Edstrom (2007), Abe viewed
 6 freedom and discipline as complementary principles necessary for sustaining
 7 both economic prosperity and social stability. This notion became an important
 8 component of his governance philosophy and informed many of his domestic
 9 policy initiatives.

10 The third goal envisioned Japan as a country driven by innovation. Abe
 11 recognised that Japan's future prosperity depended on its ability to adapt to
 12 global economic transformations and technological advancements. During the
 13 early twenty-first century, Japan faced numerous challenges, including economic
 14 stagnation, demographic decline, and increasing international competition. Abe
 15 therefore emphasised innovation, scientific advancement, and technological
 16 development as essential instruments for national revitalisation (Edstrom, 2007,
 17 p. 9). By encouraging creativity, entrepreneurship, and research, he sought to
 18 position Japan as a leading knowledge-based economy capable of competing
 19 effectively in an increasingly globalised world.

20 The fourth and perhaps most significant goal from a foreign policy
 21 perspective was the aspiration to transform Japan into a country capable of
 22 exercising leadership in international affairs. Abe believed that Japan's economic
 23 power should be accompanied by greater diplomatic influence and strategic
 24 responsibility. He was critical of what he perceived as Japan's excessive
 25 dependence on the United States and its reluctance to assume a more active role
 26 in addressing regional and global challenges. Accordingly, he advocated a
 27 foreign policy that would enable Japan to contribute more effectively to
 28 international peace, security, and economic cooperation (Edstrom, 2007, p. 9).
 29 This vision represented a significant departure from the cautious and reactive
 30 diplomatic posture that had characterised much of Japan's post-war foreign
 31 policy.

32 To realise these broad national objectives, Abe proposed six key policy
 33 priorities that together constituted a practical roadmap for national
 34 transformation. The first priority was the establishment of strong political
 35 leadership. Abe argued that effective governance required decisive leadership
 36 capable of overcoming bureaucratic inertia and implementing long-term
 37 strategic objectives. Strengthening executive authority therefore became an
 38 important aspect of his political agenda (Edstrom, 2007, p. 9).

39 The second priority involved promoting an open and competitive economy.
 40 Abe recognised that economic vitality was essential for sustaining Japan's
 41 national power and international influence. Consequently, he supported policies
 42 aimed at enhancing economic competitiveness, encouraging investment, and
 43 expanding Japan's engagement with global markets (Edstrom, 2007, p. 9).

44 The third priority focused on creating a safe and secure society. This
 45 objective encompassed both domestic and external dimensions of security. Abe
 46 argued that the government had a fundamental responsibility to protect citizens

1 from emerging threats, including terrorism, regional instability, and military
2 challenges posed by neighbouring states. This emphasis on security later became
3 a defining feature of his foreign and defence policies (Edstrom, 2007, p. 9).

4 The fourth priority was the pursuit of assertive diplomacy. Unlike the
5 relatively restrained diplomatic approaches adopted by many previous Japanese
6 leaders, Abe advocated a more proactive foreign policy capable of advancing
7 Japan's interests and values on the global stage. He sought to deepen strategic
8 partnerships with democratic nations while strengthening Japan's role in
9 international institutions and regional security frameworks (Edstrom, 2007, p. 9).

10 The fifth priority emphasised political responsibility and accountability. Abe
11 believed that political parties and elected representatives should play a more
12 active role in governance and policy implementation. This objective reflected his
13 broader commitment to enhancing political effectiveness and strengthening
14 democratic institutions (Edstrom, 2007, p. 9).

15 Finally, Abe called for moving beyond the constraints of the post-war
16 regime. This objective represented one of the most controversial aspects of his
17 political vision. Abe argued that many of Japan's post-war institutions and
18 policies were products of a unique historical context that no longer reflected
19 contemporary realities. In particular, he questioned whether constitutional
20 restrictions and existing security arrangements remained adequate in light of
21 evolving geopolitical challenges. His efforts to reinterpret aspects of Japan's
22 security policy and expand the role of the Self-Defence Forces were closely
23 linked to this broader objective (Edstrom, 2007, pp. 9-10).

24 Central to Abe's vision was the conviction that Japan should become a more
25 confident, proactive, and influential actor in international affairs. He believed
26 that economic strength alone was insufficient to secure Japan's long-term
27 interests and that greater diplomatic activism, strategic capability, and political
28 leadership were necessary for maintaining national security and international
29 relevance (Edstrom, 2007, p. 10). This vision ultimately laid the intellectual and
30 ideological foundation for the far-reaching foreign and security policy reforms
31 that characterised his tenure as Prime Minister. Through his emphasis on national
32 renewal, strategic autonomy, and international engagement, Abe sought to
33 redefine Japan's role in the emerging geopolitical landscape of the twenty-first
34 century.

35 36 37 **Japan's Post-War Foreign Policy Framework**

38
39 An understanding of Shinzo Abe's foreign and security policy reforms
40 requires a careful examination of the foundations of Japan's post-war foreign
41 policy framework. The strategic transformation initiated by Abe did not emerge
42 in a vacuum; rather, it represented a significant departure from principles that
43 had guided Japanese diplomacy and security policy since the end of the Second
44 World War. For more than six decades, Japan's foreign policy was shaped by a
45 unique combination of constitutional pacifism, reliance on the United States for
46 security, and a strong emphasis on economic development. This framework

1 enabled Japan to achieve remarkable economic success while maintaining a
 2 relatively limited role in international security affairs. However, changing
 3 geopolitical realities in the twenty-first century gradually exposed the limitations
 4 of this approach and created conditions for strategic reassessment.

5 The origins of Japan's post-war foreign policy can be traced to the country's
 6 defeat in World War II and the subsequent occupation by Allied forces under the
 7 leadership of the United States. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, the country
 8 underwent a comprehensive process of political, economic, and institutional
 9 reconstruction. One of the most significant outcomes of this process was the
 10 adoption of a new constitution in 1947, which fundamentally altered Japan's
 11 approach to national security and international relations (Pyle, 2018, p. 18). The
 12 constitution was designed to prevent the re-emergence of militarism and
 13 establish Japan as a peaceful democratic state committed to international
 14 cooperation.

15 A central feature of the post-war settlement was the establishment of a
 16 security arrangement that rested on three interrelated principles. First, Japan
 17 would rely on the United States as the primary guarantor of its national security.
 18 Second, Japan would maintain only minimal military capabilities and avoid
 19 becoming a major military power. Third, the country would concentrate its
 20 resources on economic reconstruction and development rather than defence
 21 expenditure. According to Edstrom (2007), these principles emerged through
 22 negotiations between Japan and the United States during the late 1940s and early
 23 1950s and subsequently became the foundation of Japan's post-war foreign
 24 policy orientation (pp. 14-15).

25 The first principle that is reliance on the United States for national security
 26 became institutionalised through the US-Japan Security Treaty of 1951 and its
 27 revised version in 1960. Under this arrangement, the United States committed
 28 itself to defending Japan against external aggression while maintaining military
 29 bases on Japanese territory (Samuels, 2007, p. 31). This alliance provided Japan
 30 with a security umbrella that enabled it to avoid extensive military spending
 31 while benefiting from American strategic protection. Consequently, the alliance
 32 became the cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policy throughout the
 33 Cold War and beyond.

34 The second principle involved maintaining minimal military capabilities.
 35 This aspect of Japan's post-war framework was closely linked to Article 9 of the
 36 Japanese Constitution, often referred to as the "Peace Clause." Article 9 states
 37 that the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation
 38 and reject the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes
 39 (The Constitution of Japan, 1947). Furthermore, the article declared that land,
 40 sea, and air forces would not be maintained. Although the subsequent creation
 41 of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) in 1954 introduced some flexibility in the
 42 interpretation of Article 9, the constitutional commitment to pacifism remained
 43 a defining characteristic of Japanese foreign policy (Hughes, 2021, pp. 21-24).

44 The third principle emphasised economic growth and development. By
 45 reducing defence expenditures and relying on the United States for security,
 46 Japan was able to allocate substantial resources to industrialisation,

1 technological innovation, and economic modernisation. This strategy proved
 2 remarkably successful. During the post-war decades, Japan experienced rapid
 3 economic growth and emerged as one of the world's leading industrial and
 4 technological powers (Pyle, 2018, pp. 89-94). The prioritisation of economic
 5 development over military expansion became a central feature of what later came
 6 to be known as the "Yoshida Doctrine," named after Prime Minister Shigeru
 7 Yoshida, who played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's post-war strategic
 8 orientation.

9 The Yoshida Doctrine profoundly influenced Japan's international
 10 behaviour. Rather than seeking influence through military power, Japan pursued
 11 economic diplomacy, trade expansion, development assistance, and multilateral
 12 cooperation. Its foreign policy was characterised by caution, restraint, and a
 13 preference for non-military contributions to international affairs (Samuels, 2007,
 14 pp. 34-38). This approach enabled Japan to cultivate an international image as a
 15 peaceful and responsible economic power while avoiding many of the security
 16 burdens associated with great-power competition.

17 Despite its successes, however, the post-war framework was not without
 18 limitations. Critics argued that excessive dependence on the United States
 19 constrained Japan's strategic autonomy and limited its ability to respond
 20 independently to emerging security challenges. Furthermore, constitutional
 21 restrictions on military activity often complicated Japan's participation in
 22 international peacekeeping operations and collective security arrangements
 23 (Hughes, 2021, pp. 45-48). As Japan's economic influence expanded, questions
 24 increasingly emerged regarding whether the country's diplomatic and security
 25 role adequately reflected its status as a major global power.

26 The end of the Cold War further intensified debates concerning Japan's
 27 foreign policy orientation. New security challenges, including regional conflicts,
 28 terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and maritime disputes, exposed shortcomings in
 29 existing security arrangements. The rise of China as a regional power and the
 30 growing threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes
 31 generated concerns regarding the adequacy of Japan's traditional security
 32 posture (Smith, 2019, p. 115). These developments prompted policymakers and
 33 strategic thinkers to reconsider the assumptions underlying Japan's post-war
 34 foreign policy.

35 By the beginning of the twenty-first century, many observers believed that
 36 the strategic environment surrounding Japan had changed so fundamentally that
 37 the post-war framework required significant adaptation. It was within this
 38 context that Shinzo Abe emerged as a leading advocate of reform. He argued that
 39 while the post-war framework had served Japan well during earlier decades,
 40 evolving geopolitical realities demanded a more proactive, flexible, and
 41 strategically autonomous foreign policy. Abe's subsequent reforms in defence,
 42 security, and diplomacy can therefore be understood as efforts to address the
 43 limitations of the traditional framework while preserving its most valuable
 44 elements, particularly the alliance with the United States.

45 In this sense, Japan's post-war foreign policy framework served both as the
 46 foundation upon which modern Japanese diplomacy was built and as the

principal target of Abe's reform agenda. Understanding its origins, achievements, and limitations is therefore essential for analysing the profound transformation that occurred in Japanese foreign and security policy during Abe's tenure.

Geopolitical Shifts and Emerging Security Challenges

The strategic environment confronting Japan in the early twenty-first century differed significantly from the relatively stable circumstances that characterised much of the post-war era. For decades, Japan's security policy had been based upon the assumptions of American strategic predominance in the Asia-Pacific region, limited external military threats, and the effectiveness of the post-war security framework. However, the emergence of new geopolitical realities fundamentally altered the regional balance of power and challenged many of the assumptions that had guided Japanese foreign and security policy since 1945. The rise of China, North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities, evolving patterns of great-power competition, and increasing uncertainty regarding the regional security order collectively compelled Japanese policymakers to reassess the country's strategic posture. These developments ultimately provided the context within which Shinzo Abe pursued far-reaching reforms in foreign and security policy.

Among the various challenges confronting Japan, the rise of China represented the most significant and enduring strategic concern. Since the initiation of economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China had experienced unprecedented economic growth, transforming itself into the world's second-largest economy. Economic expansion was accompanied by substantial military modernisation and increasing investments in advanced defence capabilities. According to Mearsheimer (2014), the rise of a major power inevitably alters existing regional balances and generates strategic anxieties among neighbouring states (p. 365). In East Asia, China's growing economic and military capabilities increasingly challenged the regional order that had long been dominated by the United States and its allies.

For Japan, China's growing influence was particularly concerning because of its geographical proximity and its expanding military presence in surrounding maritime areas. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) significantly increased its operational capabilities, while Beijing adopted a more assertive posture in territorial disputes throughout the East and South China Seas. One of the most contentious issues concerned the Senkaku Islands, known in China as the Diaoyu Islands, which are administered by Japan but claimed by China. Repeated incursions by Chinese coast guard and maritime vessels into waters surrounding the islands heightened tensions and raised concerns regarding the possibility of military confrontation (Smith, 2019, p. 113).

The territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands became symbolic of broader concerns regarding China's strategic ambitions. Japanese policymakers increasingly viewed Beijing's actions as attempts to alter the regional status quo and expand Chinese influence through coercive means. From a neo-realist

perspective, these developments reflected a classic shift in the regional balance of power, where the rise of a new power generated insecurity among established actors. Consequently, concerns regarding China's military modernisation and maritime activities became central factors influencing Japan's evolving security strategy during Abe's tenure (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 367-372).

In addition to China's rise, North Korea emerged as a direct and immediate security threat to Japan. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Pyongyang accelerated its efforts to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities. These developments culminated in a series of nuclear tests and missile launches that significantly heightened tensions in Northeast Asia. Several North Korean missiles either flew over Japanese territory or landed within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), creating widespread concern among policymakers and the broader public (Hughes, 2021, pp. 87-90).

North Korea's advancing military capabilities exposed important vulnerabilities within Japan's existing security framework. While the US-Japan alliance remained a critical pillar of national defence, questions emerged regarding whether traditional security arrangements were sufficient to address new forms of strategic threats. The possibility of nuclear coercion, missile attacks, and regional instability prompted calls for enhanced defence preparedness and more effective crisis-response mechanisms. As a result, North Korea's actions strengthened domestic support for security reforms and contributed to growing recognition that Japan needed to assume greater responsibility for its own defence.

Beyond the challenges posed by China and North Korea, broader transformations in the international system also influenced Japanese strategic thinking. The post-Cold War optimism that had characterised the 1990s gradually gave way to renewed geopolitical competition among major powers. The emergence of multipolarity, the diffusion of military technologies, and increasing competition over maritime spaces created a more uncertain and contested regional environment (Waltz, 1979, pp. 118-122). In this context, Japanese policymakers increasingly recognised that economic power alone was insufficient to safeguard national interests.

These developments encouraged a reassessment of long-standing assumptions regarding national security. For decades, Japan's constitutional pacifism and limited military role had been regarded as appropriate responses to the post-war environment. However, the growing complexity of regional security challenges led many policymakers to question whether these constraints remained compatible with contemporary realities. Critics argued that Article 9 of the Constitution, while symbolically important, limited Japan's ability to contribute effectively to collective security arrangements and respond flexibly to emerging threats (Samuels, 2007, pp. 146-150).

The debate over Article 9 became particularly significant during Abe's tenure. Supporters of reform contended that constitutional restrictions reflected historical circumstances that no longer existed and that Japan required greater strategic flexibility in an increasingly competitive regional environment. Opponents, however, feared that revising long-standing security principles could

undermine Japan's pacifist identity and increase regional tensions. Nevertheless, the growing perception of external threats contributed to a gradual shift in public and political attitudes regarding defence and security policy.

It was within this evolving strategic environment that Shinzo Abe articulated the need for a more proactive and comprehensive approach to national security. Abe argued that Japan could no longer afford to remain a passive observer of regional developments and that the country must actively shape the security environment in which it operated. He believed that the challenges posed by China's rise, North Korea's military provocations, and broader geopolitical transformations required a reassessment of existing policies and institutions (Liff & Lipsy, 2022, p. 148).

Abe therefore promoted a vision of Japan as a "Proactive Contributor to Peace," emphasising greater international engagement, enhanced defence capabilities, and stronger cooperation with like-minded democratic partners. His strategic thinking reflected the belief that national security could no longer be guaranteed solely through economic strength or dependence on the United States. Instead, Japan needed to develop its own institutional capacities while simultaneously strengthening alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

The changing regional balance of power thus served as the principal catalyst for Japan's foreign and security policy transformation. The rise of China, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and the broader evolution of the international system collectively exposed the limitations of the traditional post-war framework. These challenges encouraged Japanese leaders to reconsider established assumptions regarding security and sovereignty and created the conditions necessary for Abe's ambitious reform agenda. Consequently, understanding these geopolitical shifts is essential for explaining the emergence of Japan's more assertive and proactive foreign policy during the Abe era.

Revised National Security Policy under Abe

One of the most significant aspects of Shinzo Abe's political legacy was the comprehensive transformation of Japan's national security architecture. While previous governments had gradually adapted Japan's security policies to changing international conditions, Abe pursued reforms with unprecedented determination and strategic coherence. His administration sought to overcome institutional limitations, strengthen national defence capabilities, and enhance Japan's ability to respond to increasingly complex security challenges. These reforms reflected Abe's conviction that the post-war security framework required substantial revision to address the realities of the twenty-first-century geopolitical environment. According to Liff (2018), Abe's security initiatives represented the most ambitious effort to reshape Japan's defence and strategic posture since the end of World War II (pp. 5-7).

The reforms undertaken during Abe's tenure were motivated by concerns regarding China's military rise, North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes,

emerging non-traditional security threats, and uncertainties surrounding the future of the regional security order. Through institutional innovation, legal reinterpretation, military modernisation, and enhanced alliance cooperation, Abe sought to create a more proactive and resilient security framework capable of safeguarding Japan's national interests. These initiatives collectively reflected the principle of "Proactive Contribution to Peace," which became a defining feature of Japan's security policy under his leadership (Government of Japan, 2013).

Establishment of the National Security Council

One of Abe's earliest and most consequential reforms was the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013. Prior to its creation, Japan's national security decision-making process was often criticised for being fragmented, bureaucratically cumbersome, and lacking effective coordination among relevant ministries and agencies (Liff, 2018, pp. 8-10). Security decisions frequently involved lengthy consultations among multiple institutions, limiting the government's capacity to respond rapidly to crises.

The establishment of the NSC sought to address these shortcomings by centralising strategic decision-making within the executive branch. Modelled in part on the United States National Security Council, the Japanese NSC brought together key policymakers, including the Prime Minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Defence. This institutional arrangement enhanced coordination among government agencies and strengthened the Prime Minister's ability to direct national security policy.

The creation of the NSC represented a significant shift in Japan's governance structure. It enabled more coherent strategic planning, facilitated information sharing, and improved crisis management capabilities. Importantly, it also reflected Abe's broader objective of strengthening political leadership and reducing bureaucratic obstacles to effective policy implementation (Samuels, 2007, pp. 189-192).

National Security Strategy

A second major reform was the adoption of Japan's first comprehensive National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2013. Prior to this development, Japan lacked a unified strategic document that articulated national security priorities and long-term objectives. Security policies were often formulated through separate defence guidelines and policy statements without an overarching strategic framework.

The National Security Strategy filled this gap by providing a comprehensive assessment of the security environment and establishing a coherent framework for future policy development (Government of Japan, 2013, pp. 1-5). The document identified major challenges confronting Japan, including the shifting global balance of power, China's military modernisation, North Korea's nuclear

ambitions, maritime disputes, terrorism, cyber threats, and threats to the international rules-based order.

A central concept of the NSS was the idea of Japan as a “Proactive Contributor to Peace.” This doctrine emphasised Japan’s responsibility to contribute more actively to regional and global security while remaining committed to peaceful principles. Rather than abandoning pacifism, Abe sought to reinterpret it in a manner that would permit greater international engagement and security cooperation.

The NSS also highlighted the importance of strengthening the US-Japan alliance, deepening partnerships with democratic states, and promoting a rules-based international order. By articulating these priorities within a formal strategic document, Abe institutionalised a long-term security vision that continues to influence Japanese policy today (Liff & Lipsky, 2022, pp. 170-173).

Collective Self-Defence

Perhaps the most controversial reform undertaken during Abe’s tenure concerned the reinterpretation of constitutional restrictions relating to collective self-defence. Since the adoption of Article 9 of the Constitution, successive Japanese governments had maintained that Japan possessed the inherent right of collective self-defence under international law but could not exercise that right because of constitutional constraints.

Abe challenged this long-standing interpretation. He argued that evolving security threats required Japan to cooperate more closely with allies and partners in order to ensure national security. In July 2014, his government approved a reinterpretation of Article 9 permitting the limited exercise of collective self-defence under specific circumstances (Hughes, 2021, pp. 118-123).

Under the revised interpretation, Japan could use force when three conditions were met: first, when an armed attack against Japan or a closely related country threatened Japan’s survival; second, when no other means existed to protect the Japanese people; and third, when the use of force was limited to the minimum necessary extent. These principles were subsequently incorporated into the 2015 security legislation.

Supporters argued that the reform enhanced deterrence, strengthened alliance cooperation, and improved Japan’s ability to respond to regional crises. Critics, however, contended that the reinterpretation undermined constitutional pacifism and circumvented formal constitutional amendment procedures. Despite intense political debate, the reform marked a historic shift in Japan’s post-war security policy and significantly expanded the operational scope of the Self-Defence Forces.

Strengthening Defence Capabilities

Alongside institutional and legal reforms, Abe’s administration undertook substantial efforts to strengthen Japan’s defence capabilities. Recognising the

growing complexity of regional security challenges, the government increased defence expenditures and invested in military modernisation programmes.

Particular emphasis was placed on enhancing maritime and air defence capabilities in response to increasing Chinese activities in the East China Sea. Japan expanded surveillance operations, improved intelligence-gathering systems, and strengthened its capacity to defend remote islands (Smith, 2019, pp. 198-203). New military equipment, including advanced fighter aircraft, missile defence systems, naval assets, and surveillance technologies, was acquired to improve operational readiness.

The government also prioritised emerging security domains such as cyberspace and outer space. Dedicated cyber defence units were established, and greater resources were allocated to protecting critical infrastructure against cyber threats. Similarly, space-based technologies were increasingly integrated into defence planning and intelligence operations.

These measures reflected a broader recognition that national security in the twenty-first century extended beyond traditional military threats. By investing in advanced capabilities and emerging technologies, Abe sought to ensure that Japan remained capable of addressing both conventional and non-conventional security challenges (Hughes, 2021, pp. 126-130).

Institutional Reforms

In addition to the establishment of the NSC and adoption of the NSS, Abe introduced several institutional reforms designed to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of national security decision-making. These reforms sought to overcome the fragmentation that had historically characterised Japan's security governance system.

One important initiative involved strengthening coordination between the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intelligence agencies, and the Prime Minister's Office. Enhanced inter-agency cooperation improved information sharing and reduced delays in policy implementation. Decision-making processes were streamlined to facilitate more rapid responses to emerging crises and unexpected security developments (Liff, 2018, pp. 10-12).

The government also revised defence planning procedures and improved mechanisms for alliance coordination with the United States. Updated defence cooperation guidelines enhanced interoperability between Japanese and American forces and facilitated joint responses to regional contingencies. These reforms reinforced the alliance while simultaneously enabling Japan to assume a more active role in shared security responsibilities.

Collectively, these institutional innovations strengthened the strategic coherence of Japan's national security apparatus and improved its capacity to address complex challenges in an increasingly uncertain regional environment.

In brief, Abe's reforms fundamentally transformed Japan's national security architecture. Through the establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, strengthening of defence capabilities, and implementation of wide-

1 ranging institutional reforms, Abe reshaped Japan's approach to security and
 2 defence. While maintaining the alliance with the United States and preserving
 3 key elements of Japan's post-war identity, these initiatives expanded the
 4 country's strategic options and enhanced its ability to respond to contemporary
 5 security challenges. Consequently, the reforms undertaken during Abe's tenure
 6 represent the most significant transformation of Japanese security policy since
 7 the end of World War II and constitute a central pillar of his broader foreign
 8 policy legacy.

11 **The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision and Strategic Partnerships**

13 One of the most influential and enduring aspects of Shinzo Abe's foreign
 14 policy was the formulation and promotion of the concept of a "Free and Open
 15 Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). While Abe's domestic security reforms transformed
 16 Japan's strategic capabilities, the FOIP vision represented the external dimension
 17 of his broader foreign policy agenda. It provided a comprehensive geopolitical
 18 framework through which Japan sought to address changing regional power
 19 dynamics, strengthen cooperation with like-minded countries, and preserve a
 20 rules-based international order. Over time, the FOIP concept evolved into one of
 21 the most influential strategic ideas shaping contemporary Indo-Pacific
 22 geopolitics and significantly enhanced Japan's diplomatic profile on the global
 23 stage.

24 The intellectual origins of FOIP can be traced to Abe's earlier strategic
 25 thinking regarding the growing interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific
 26 Oceans. In his 2007 address to the Indian Parliament entitled "Confluence of the
 27 Two Seas," Abe argued that the Pacific and Indian Oceans constituted a single
 28 strategic space linked by commerce, security, and shared political values (Abe,
 29 2007). This vision reflected his recognition that geopolitical developments in
 30 East Asia, South Asia, and the broader maritime region were becoming
 31 increasingly interconnected. Rather than viewing Asia through narrow regional
 32 divisions, Abe proposed a wider strategic perspective centred on maritime
 33 cooperation and democratic partnerships.

34 The Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision was formally articulated during
 35 Abe's second tenure as Prime Minister and became a central pillar of Japanese
 36 foreign policy. At its core, FOIP sought to promote an international order based
 37 upon five key principles: freedom of navigation, respect for the rule of law,
 38 maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade (Government of Japan,
 39 2017). These principles reflected Japan's commitment to preserving stability,
 40 transparency, and openness in an increasingly competitive geopolitical
 41 environment.

42 Freedom of navigation occupied a particularly important place within the
 43 FOIP framework. As a trading nation heavily dependent on maritime commerce,
 44 Japan regarded secure sea lanes as essential to its economic prosperity and
 45 national security. Consequently, FOIP emphasised the importance of ensuring
 46 unrestricted access to international waters and preventing attempts by any state

1 to alter maritime boundaries through coercion or force. This principle acquired
2 particular significance in the context of growing tensions in the East and South
3 China Seas.

4 Closely related to freedom of navigation was the emphasis on the rule of
5 law. Abe consistently argued that international disputes should be resolved
6 through legal mechanisms and adherence to established international norms
7 rather than through unilateral actions or military coercion. By promoting a rules-
8 based order, Japan sought to strengthen international institutions and discourage
9 behaviour that could undermine regional stability (Liff & Lipsy, 2022, pp. 180-
10 183).

11 Maritime security constituted another important pillar of FOIP. Given the
12 increasing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and the growing
13 presence of naval forces, Abe viewed maritime security as essential for
14 maintaining regional peace and economic prosperity. Japan therefore expanded
15 maritime cooperation with partner countries, enhanced capacity-building
16 programmes, and supported initiatives aimed at improving maritime domain
17 awareness throughout the region (Smith, 2019, pp. 210-214).

18 Regional connectivity and open trade formed the economic foundations of
19 FOIP. Abe believed that economic integration, infrastructure development, and
20 trade cooperation could contribute significantly to regional stability.
21 Consequently, Japan actively promoted high-quality infrastructure projects,
22 economic partnerships, and free trade agreements designed to strengthen
23 regional connectivity while providing alternatives to competing geopolitical
24 initiatives. This approach reflected Abe's broader belief that economic
25 diplomacy and strategic engagement should reinforce one another.

26 Abe viewed the Indo-Pacific as the primary arena of twenty-first-century
27 geopolitics. The region contained some of the world's most dynamic economies,
28 critical maritime routes, and emerging centres of political influence. At the same
29 time, it was increasingly characterised by strategic competition, particularly as
30 China's economic and military capabilities expanded. Abe therefore sought to
31 strengthen cooperation among democratic and like-minded states that shared
32 common interests in preserving regional stability and an open international order
33 (Miller, 2021, pp. 97-100).

34 A central component of this strategy involved deepening Japan's alliance
35 with the United States. While Abe sought to enhance Japan's strategic autonomy,
36 he regarded the US–Japan alliance as the cornerstone of regional security.
37 Throughout his tenure, he worked closely with successive American
38 administrations to strengthen defence cooperation, improve alliance
39 coordination, and promote shared strategic objectives. The alliance remained the
40 foundation upon which broader Indo-Pacific partnerships were constructed (Liff
41 & Lipsy, 2022, pp. 175-178).

42 Abe also attached particular importance to strengthening relations with
43 India. He viewed India as a crucial partner in maintaining regional stability and
44 promoting democratic values. Under his leadership, Japan and India expanded
45 cooperation in areas including infrastructure development, maritime security,
46 defence exchanges, and economic investment. The relationship evolved into a

1 Special Strategic and Global Partnership, reflecting the growing convergence of
2 interests between the two countries (Pant & Joshi, 2017, pp. 42-45).

3 Similarly, Australia emerged as one of Japan's closest strategic partners
4 during Abe's tenure. Shared concerns regarding regional security, commitment
5 to democratic governance, and support for a rules-based order encouraged closer
6 cooperation between the two countries. Defence collaboration, intelligence
7 sharing, and joint military exercises increased substantially, contributing to the
8 development of a robust strategic partnership (Medcalf, 2020, pp. 146-149).

9 Beyond the Indo-Pacific region, Abe also sought to strengthen relations with
10 European partners. Japan expanded security dialogues and strategic cooperation
11 with countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, while
12 simultaneously deepening engagement with the European Union. These
13 partnerships reflected Abe's recognition that maintaining a rules-based
14 international order required cooperation among democratic states across
15 different regions.

16 Perhaps the most visible manifestation of Abe's strategic vision was the
17 revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising Japan, the
18 United States, India, and Australia. Originally proposed during Abe's first term
19 in office, the Quad was revitalised in 2017 amid growing concerns regarding
20 regional security and the future balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Although
21 the Quad was not established as a formal military alliance, it provided a platform
22 for strategic consultation, security cooperation, and coordination among four
23 major democratic powers (Miller, 2021, pp. 102-105).

24 From a neo-realist perspective, the Quad can be interpreted as a form of
25 external balancing designed to maintain a favourable balance of power in the
26 Indo-Pacific region. By fostering cooperation among like-minded states, Japan
27 sought to contribute to regional stability while discouraging unilateral attempts
28 to alter the existing order. The Quad also reflected Abe's belief that collective
29 action among democratic partners was essential for addressing emerging security
30 challenges.

31 In other words, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision represented one of
32 Shinzo Abe's most important contributions to contemporary international
33 relations. Through its emphasis on freedom of navigation, the rule of law,
34 maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade, FOIP provided a
35 comprehensive strategic framework for responding to evolving geopolitical
36 realities. By strengthening partnerships with the United States, India, Australia,
37 and European countries while revitalising the Quad, Abe positioned Japan as a
38 central architect of the emerging Indo-Pacific order. Consequently, FOIP not
39 only transformed Japan's foreign policy orientation but also established a lasting
40 strategic legacy that continues to shape regional geopolitics in the twenty-first
41 century.

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1 **Outcomes and Implications of Abe's Foreign Policy Initiatives**

2
3 The foreign policy initiatives pursued by Shinzo Abe during his tenure
4 produced significant and lasting consequences for Japan's strategic orientation,
5 diplomatic engagement, and international standing. Through a combination of
6 institutional reforms, security policy adjustments, alliance strengthening, and
7 proactive diplomacy, Abe fundamentally reshaped Japan's role in regional and
8 global affairs. Although debates continue regarding the extent and permanence
9 of these changes, there is broad scholarly consensus that Abe's leadership
10 marked one of the most transformative periods in Japan's post-war foreign policy
11 evolution. The outcomes of these initiatives can be observed in several
12 interconnected dimensions.

13 First, Japan emerged as a more proactive participant in regional security
14 affairs. For much of the post-war era, Japan maintained a cautious security
15 posture characterised by constitutional constraints, limited military
16 responsibilities, and heavy reliance on the United States. Under Abe, however,
17 Japan adopted a more active role in addressing regional security challenges. The
18 establishment of the National Security Council, the adoption of the National
19 Security Strategy, and the reinterpretation of collective self-defence collectively
20 enhanced Japan's capacity to contribute to regional stability and security
21 cooperation (Liff, 2018, pp. 55-58). The country increasingly participated in
22 joint military exercises, maritime security initiatives, peacekeeping operations,
23 and strategic dialogues with partner nations. Consequently, Japan transitioned
24 from being primarily a security consumer to becoming a more significant
25 contributor to regional security governance.

26 Second, Abe's foreign policy considerably expanded Japan's diplomatic
27 influence through strategic partnerships and multilateral engagement.
28 Recognising the growing complexity of regional geopolitics, Abe actively
29 cultivated relations with countries that shared Japan's commitment to democratic
30 governance, the rule of law, and a rules-based international order. Strategic
31 partnerships with India, Australia, Southeast Asian countries, and European
32 powers strengthened Japan's diplomatic reach and enhanced its ability to shape
33 regional developments (Smith, 2019, pp. 214-217). Abe also demonstrated
34 strong commitment to multilateral institutions and forums, viewing them as
35 important mechanisms for promoting cooperation and stability. Through active
36 diplomacy, Japan assumed a more visible leadership role in regional and
37 international affairs, thereby increasing its influence beyond the traditional
38 confines of East Asia.

39 A third major outcome was the strengthening and modernisation of the
40 United States-Japan alliance. Although the alliance had remained the cornerstone
41 of Japan's security policy since the early post-war period, Abe sought to adapt it
42 to emerging security realities. Defence cooperation guidelines were revised,
43 interoperability between military forces was enhanced, and mechanisms for
44 strategic coordination were strengthened (Hughes, 2021, pp. 130-134). The
45 reinterpretation of collective self-defence further enabled Japan to cooperate
46 more effectively with the United States in addressing shared security challenges.

1 As a result, the alliance evolved from a predominantly asymmetric security
 2 arrangement into a more flexible and integrated partnership capable of
 3 responding to a wider range of regional contingencies. This strengthened alliance
 4 not only enhanced deterrence but also reinforced Japan's strategic importance
 5 within the broader Indo-Pacific region.

6 Fourth, Abe's reforms provided Japan with greater flexibility in responding
 7 to international crises and emerging security threats. Prior to these reforms,
 8 constitutional and institutional constraints often limited Japan's ability to react
 9 swiftly and effectively to rapidly changing security situations. The establishment
 10 of the National Security Council improved policy coordination, while revised
 11 legal frameworks expanded the operational scope of the Self-Defence Forces.
 12 These changes enhanced the government's capacity to address challenges
 13 ranging from military contingencies and maritime disputes to humanitarian
 14 crises and non-traditional security threats such as cyberattacks and terrorism
 15 (Government of Japan, 2013). By increasing strategic flexibility, Abe's reforms
 16 enabled Japan to adapt more effectively to an increasingly uncertain and
 17 complex international environment.

18 A fifth and perhaps most enduring outcome was the emergence of the Free
 19 and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision as a widely recognised strategic framework.
 20 Initially promoted by Abe as a Japanese foreign policy initiative, FOIP gradually
 21 gained acceptance among numerous countries and international organisations.
 22 The concept's emphasis on freedom of navigation, respect for international law,
 23 maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade resonated with states
 24 concerned about preserving a stable and rules-based regional order (Medcalf,
 25 2020, pp. 162-165). Over time, the FOIP framework was incorporated into the
 26 strategic discourse of countries including the United States, Australia, India, and
 27 several European nations (Government of Japan, 2017). The widespread adoption
 28 of this concept significantly enhanced Japan's intellectual and diplomatic
 29 influence in shaping contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

30 Beyond these specific outcomes, Abe's foreign policy initiatives also
 31 contributed to a broader transformation of Japan's international identity.
 32 Traditionally viewed as an economic power with limited strategic influence,
 33 Japan increasingly came to be regarded as an important security actor and
 34 diplomatic leader. The combination of proactive diplomacy, enhanced security
 35 capabilities, and strategic partnerships elevated Japan's profile in global affairs
 36 and reinforced its reputation as a defender of the rules-based international order
 37 (Liff & Lipsy, 2022, pp. 188-190).

38 To sum up, the outcomes of Abe's foreign policy initiatives extended far
 39 beyond immediate policy adjustments. They reshaped Japan's strategic posture,
 40 expanded its diplomatic influence, strengthened key alliances, improved crisis-
 41 response capabilities, and introduced a geopolitical vision that continues to
 42 influence regional politics. Collectively, these developments enhanced Japan's
 43 international standing and reinforced its role as a major actor in the Indo-Pacific
 44 region. Consequently, Abe's foreign policy legacy remains a defining feature of
 45 contemporary Japanese statecraft and continues to shape the country's
 46 engagement with an evolving international order.

1 Critical Assessment of Abe's Legacy

2
3 The transformation of Japan's foreign and security policy under Shinzo Abe
4 has generated extensive scholarly debate. While many observers regard Abe as
5 the architect of a new Japanese strategic posture, others caution against
6 attributing all policy changes exclusively to his leadership. Critics argue that
7 several reforms associated with the Abe era were rooted in longer-term trends
8 that predated his administration. The gradual expansion of the Self-Defence
9 Forces' role, growing concerns regarding China's rise, debates over
10 constitutional reinterpretation, and efforts to strengthen alliance cooperation had
11 already emerged under previous governments (Samuels, 2007; Hughes, 2021).
12 Consequently, some scholars contend that the trajectory of Japanese foreign
13 policy reform reflected broader structural forces rather than the actions of a
14 single political leader.

15 From this perspective, the changing regional security environment would
16 likely have compelled any Japanese government to reconsider traditional
17 security assumptions. The rise of China, North Korea's nuclear and missile
18 programmes, increasing maritime competition, and uncertainties surrounding
19 the regional balance of power created pressures that demanded policy adaptation.
20 Neo-realist scholars, in particular, emphasise that states respond to systemic
21 constraints and security threats regardless of the preferences of individual
22 leaders (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, some argue that many of the reforms
23 implemented during Abe's tenure represented logical responses to evolving
24 geopolitical realities rather than uniquely personal initiatives.

25 Nevertheless, focusing exclusively on structural factors risks
26 underestimating Abe's political significance. While external pressures created
27 opportunities for reform, it was Abe's leadership that translated these pressures
28 into concrete policy outcomes. His longevity in office provided an unusual
29 degree of political stability, enabling him to pursue long-term strategic objectives
30 that had eluded many of his predecessors. Moreover, Abe demonstrated
31 considerable political skill in building consensus within the Liberal Democratic
32 Party, managing bureaucratic resistance, and securing public support for
33 controversial security reforms (Liff & Lipsey, 2022).

34 Abe's contribution therefore lies not merely in initiating change but in
35 consolidating and institutionalising it. Through the establishment of the National
36 Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of
37 collective self-defence, and promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision,
38 he embedded strategic reforms within Japan's policy framework. As a result,
39 many of these initiatives have continued beyond his tenure and remain central to
40 Japan's contemporary foreign and security policy. His legacy thus reflects both
41 the influence of structural geopolitical forces and the decisive role of political
42 leadership in shaping national strategy.

Conclusion

Shinzo Abe fundamentally transformed Japan's foreign and security policy and left an enduring imprint on the country's strategic trajectory. Through a combination of institutional reforms, enhanced defence capabilities, strategic partnerships, and proactive diplomacy, he moved Japan beyond many of the limitations associated with its traditional post-war foreign policy framework. His administration sought to adapt Japan's security posture to an increasingly complex and competitive regional environment marked by the rise of China, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and shifting balances of power in the Indo-Pacific.

Viewed through a neo-realist perspective, Abe's policies represented rational responses to changing geopolitical realities. The establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, and strengthening of strategic partnerships reflected efforts to enhance Japan's capacity to safeguard its national interests and contribute to regional stability. Equally significant was his promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and his role in revitalising the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, both of which elevated Japan's diplomatic influence and strategic relevance.

Although some elements of these reforms originated before his administration, Abe's leadership was decisive in implementing, consolidating, and institutionalising them. His ability to translate structural pressures into coherent policy initiatives distinguishes his tenure from that of many predecessors. Consequently, the legacy of Abe's foreign policy continues to shape Japan's strategic outlook and remains essential for understanding contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics and the evolving role of Japan in international affairs.

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